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HOW CIA HOSTAGE HUNTER FLUNKED KEY TEST: MURDER

WASHINGTON — A CIA agent who infiltrated a group of Lebanese fanatics holding U.S. hostages had to abandon his mission when he was ordered to assassinate a Lebanese politician, The Post has learned.

The operation was a highly secret effort by the Reagan administration to learn where the hostages were imprisoned, for a possible military rescue.

The highly sensitive mission target was Hezbollah, the extremist pro-Khomeini Shiite Moslem terror group operating under the name of Islamic Jihad, or Holy War.

Hezbollah is believed to be holding six Americans in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.

U.S. officials said planning for the penetration of Hezbollah began in late 1985, when two secret arms shipments to Iran produced the release of only one hostage, Rev. Benjaïm Weir, despite promises from Iranian middlemen that all six would be released.

Deeply frustrated over the failure of the arms deal, the CIA — with White House approval — formed a special task force to locate the Americans, sources said.

Called the Hostage Rescue Force, it was composed of intelligence and anti-terror specialists from U.S. agencies, including the Pentagon's secret commando unit, Delta Force.

By NILES LATHEM
Bureau Chief

It was headed by CIA counter-terrorist expert Charles Allen.

Sources said the group paid thousands of dollars to Lebanese hashish dealers and other informants to pinpoint the hostages' location.

They said a trusted CIA agent of Lebanese descent, familiar with the Shiite sect, was recruited to penetrate Hezbollah at its headquarters in Baalbek.

The agent, whom officials would not identify, was convincing enough to be welcomed into the fanatical organization.

But Hezbollah leaders required him to pass a final test — he was ordered to assassinate a Lebanese political figure.

The CIA, with great reluctance, decided to withdraw the agent because of strict U.S. laws prohibiting assassination by U.S. intelligence agencies.

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